

The Cultural Work of Sejong the Great

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Sejong's Accession and Early Reign

Of all Korean kings, Sejong is the most remembered. He is the king who appears on the postage stamps and money, whose name identifies boulevards, cultural centers, foundations and prizes. But the blaze of his halo has turned him into a saintly, mythic figure, and ironically obscured many of his

achievements and human qualities. To genuinely understand him, it is necessary to turn away from all the statues and hagiography and see this great man securely in his time and place.

The political culture which produced King Sejong, eschewing charisma and personality as the chief criteria of royal greatness, rather emphasized Confucian morality and conformance to the image of the "sage" (sōng) established in the Confucian classics. Even in his lifetime, the king's persona was sacralized. The most powerful political figures could only approach him with utter deference, while the common people, on the relatively rare occasions when he left his palace for some necessary royal function, actually had to cover their windows and turn away from him lest their gaze sully his sagely presence. Inevitably, however, even this solemn aura had to be broken by the exigencies of practical government and politics. Officials could argue vigorously with him over policy and administrative matters; indeed, the Confucian concept of loyal remonstrance obligated them to do so. Sejong was denounced, for example, for spending so much of his workday on the alphabet, and there were plenty of other matters over which he and the bureaucracy were from time to time at loggerheads. In such circumstances, the king's personality and character could hardly remain hidden. Even the common people, though deprived of direct impressions or "news" in the formal sense, could hardly have been unaware of what manner of man sat on the nation's throne.

Very little is known of Sejong's early life. He was born on May 7, 1397, the third son of Yi Pangwŏn, himself the son of Yi Sōnggye (King T'aejo), the founder of the Chosŏn dynasty. Yi Pangwŏn had played a major role as aide to his father in the establishment of the new dynasty, and after he himself came to throne as King T'aejong (r. 1400-1418) he laid strong administrative and political foundations for the new state. In 1404, T'aejong

selected his eldest son, Prince Yangnyŏng, as crown prince, and the younger Sejong (then known as Prince Ch'ungnyŏng) would seem to have been destined for obscurity along with his ten other brothers. But in the end it was Prince Yangnyŏng who faded into obscurity. He remained crown prince almost to the end of his father's reign, but was suddenly deposed in 1418 and replaced by his younger brother Sejong. Less than two months later, T'aejong abdicated and Sejong came to the throne (September 7, 1418). He was at that time twenty-one years old.

The reasons for this sudden turnabout are unclear. Given that Prince Yangnyŏng had been criticized for his weakness of will and indecisive character, the conventional thinking is that Sejong's superior intelligence simply made him the more appropriate choice to succeed his father. But if personal character had been the sole criterion, that would have been apparent much earlier; why wait for years to effect the change? It is the very suddenness of the change, and the quickly following abdication, that compel attention. They suggest that T'aejong intended to surprise his bureaucracy. With more than one qualified heir, some senior officials, anxious for more power for the bureaucracy, might have wanted the weaker Yangnyŏng to succeed. Doubtless many of them, anticipating his succession during his fifteen years as designated successor, had cultivated his friendship. For T'aejong to now replace him with Ch'ungnyŏng (Sejong), and then abdicate while he himself still had a few healthy years left, would enable him to decisively set the course of the kingdom for decades to come. If such was indeed T'aejong's plan, he succeeded admirably.

When Sejong came to the throne in 1418, the administrative and political structure of the Chosŏn dynasty had already been laid out by T'aejong.